

Joshua Whitehead. *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*. Vancouver: Talon Books, 2017. 128 pp. ISBN 9781772011876

<http://talonbooks.com/books/full-metal-indigiqueer>

In *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*, Joshua Whitehead broadens the reach of Indigenous culture by linking trickster and cyber discourses through the figure of Zoa, who defies any reductive take on subjectivity or culture: “though i am machine / you cannot download me / when you enter me / do not decode my dna / as an html story” (Whitehead 76). Although cyborg discourse, as well as the posthumanism that it is often associated with, do not immediately seem relevant to concerns about indigenous sovereignty and language revitalization, Whitehead’s work shows that cyborg and trickster discourses are not only compatible but are in fact perfectly matched. Indeed, both the trickster figure and the cyborg are intended to show us the limits of our ideologies by blurring the boundaries between what is and what is not possible. This liminal role has long been ascribed to Indigenous peoples, who scholars like Lindsey Clare Smith and Susan Scheckel, among others, have pointed out were often used as oppositional figures against which the United States and Canada could develop national identities. Such is also the case with cyborg figures, who often highlight questions about the nature (and scope) of humanity. Speaking directly to this similarity in the poem, “full-metal oji-cree,” Zoa states, “robotics have always been poc” (112).

The collection begins with the genesis of Zoa: readers turn through the first few pages, each comprised of a mostly-black background, approaching a slowly-growing small circle of light, which soon reveals the message “H3R314M” or “Here I Am.” But who is this “I” in this passage? Is this our first introduction to Zoa or perhaps the author himself? True to the spirit of trickster polemics, the speaker of these poems is often hard to determine. In “can you be my fulltime daddy:white&gold [questionmark],” a poem in which Zoa is the presumed speaker due to the installation of music software that occurs at the beginning of it, elusiveness in fact undergirds Zoa’s sense of self: “my mother told me i had a tricksters soul / no moral compass pointing north / no fixed personality, gender / just an inner indecisiveness that was as wide / as wavering as smouldering sweetgrass / on the horizon, blind” (Whitehead 54). This “tricksters soul” seems to relate to Zoa’s two-spiritedness, which the cyborg “ndn” actively and painstakingly expresses through experiences steeped in rejection, hurt, and ultimately acceptance (both by the self and the community). This collection also shows how the trickster’s job is not simply to resist and upset the status quo, just because, but rather that their actions are designed to help their communities: “there is shame here / but there is family too / there is indigeneity / there is truth / & i need all to survive: / hereIamhereIamhereIamhereIam” (Whitehead 88).

The enjambment of words at the end of this passage illustrates the collection’s ambivalence towards language. At times defamiliarized through crowding and at other times merged with numbers (“H3R314M”), the English language remains a constant source of anxiety: “why am i always adapting your words / from latin tongues & french theorists / ive mastered my masters language / ill need a tic tac after this poem” (Whitehead 68). The author desperately strives to make the colonial English language his own – and succeeds in doing so, so that he can illustrate its limitations and challenge us to think beyond it. English is no longer just the “masters language” but the speaker’s, as well (Whitehead 68). The poems’ anxiety towards English also explains their conscious use of Cree, Whitehead’s indigenous language, such as in references to “nikawiy” (mother), “kokum” (grandmother), and “kisâkihitin” (I love you). In one of the

collection's better-known poems, "Mihkokwaniy" (meaning "rose"), winner of Canada's History Award for Aboriginal Arts and Stories (for writers aged 19–29), Whitehead writes about his "kokum," who went by "many names: / the ndn woman / the whitehead lady / a Saskatoon female / [and] the beauty queen" (99). In its telling of the grandmother's story, the poem illustrates how white settlers and other non-indigenous people can use the English language to dehumanize indigenous persons: recalling how his grandmother was often described as beautiful, the speaker explains, "what they meant by beauty was: / cheapdirtybrownprostitutedrugaddictalcoholicfirewaterslut" (99). The power of language is underlined by the ensuing headlines about the grandmother's death, which the speaker points out read "woman found strangled" instead of "the 'strangulation death / of the whitehead woman'" (100). The grandmother is secondary to what happened to her; she is even seen as secondary to her murderer, who is punished with only "six years and fifty words" (101) no doubt on account of "his whiteness [which] is his weakness [which] is his innocence" (100). The loss of the grandmother is felt through the generations, made manifest in the speaker's estrangement from the Cree language: "would you teach me what it means to be 2S / tell me i can be a beautiful brown boy in love [questionmark] / make me say niizh-manitoag – feel the power of the tongue" (102). Here, the collection speaks to the struggle for language revitalization across most indigenous communities: the speaker can only "feel the power of the tongue" when they speak their two-spirit identity in Cree. The fierce retrieval of Cree upends colonialist thinking that indigenous languages are nonsensical and irrelevant in today's world.

The collection's anxiety towards the English language extends to other pillars of western knowledge: Zoa, for instance, downloads naming software to lay claim to "thisbodywhichisrightfullymine" before others may attempt to do so (22). Similarly, by downloading the "disneysoftware," Zoa answers the old question of "What makes a red man red?" posed in the 1953 film *Peter Pan*: "shame makes the red|man| red / makes him injun; makes him feel / makes him real in pictures & in the mirror" (86). Zoa also downloads and learns Shakespeare (39) and Dickens (47) programs to ultimately un- and re-learn them and make them their own: passages like "i am the ghost of natives past;/ the ghost of colonialism present;/ the ghost of settlers yet to come" (Whitehead 48), inspired by Dickens, or "to be or not to be: am i gay is the question" (Whitehead 39), gesturing to Shakespeare, transfer these canonical works into a context much more relevant to the indigenous, Two-Spirit experiences that this collection chronicles. In the Acknowledgements section, Whitehead proclaims, "this is an honour song, this is a survivance song, / this is your song; lets sing the skin back to our bones [period] hereIam: / indigiqueer [period]" (115). These poems do not simply deconstruct language and knowledge; they create an opportunity for readers to create new knowledges, new definitions of self and community, and to "sing the skin back to [their] bones."

Whitehead seamlessly weaves discourses on cyborgs, tricksters, and "2S" persons. Upsetting how we define these terminologies, as well as how we use the English language, this collection will be of interest to readers and scholars actively seeking a collection of poetry that forges new modes of understanding and expression and that relentlessly and unapologetically builds towards an indigenous future. These are poems of affirmation, resilience, and resistance.

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